SŪRAH 56

Al-Wāqi'ah

(The Inevitable Event)

Prologue

Al-Wāqi'ah, The Inevitable Event, is the name given to this Makkan *sūrah* explaining its subject matter. The main issue discussed is resurrection. The *sūrah* specifically refutes the argument of those who doubt it, denying the Qur'ān and associating partners with God. They always wonder: "*What! When we have died and become mere dust and bones, are we to be raised up again? And our forefathers, too?*" (Verses 47–48) Therefore, the *sūrah* begins by describing resurrection, giving it a name, *al-wāqi'ah*, that makes its happening absolutely clear, leaving no room for doubt: "*When that which is certain to happen will have come to pass no one will then deny its having come to pass.*" (Verses 1–2) It highlights the events that distinguish that day from all others: people's positions are totally changed, as is the earth's appearance. These fearful events produce a different earth and entirely new values: "*abasing [some], exalting [others]. When the earth is violently shaken and the mountains crumble away and scatter abroad into fine dust, you shall be divided into three classes.*" (Verses 3–7)

The *sūrah* then describes the fates of these three classes, the ones to the fore, those to the right and those to the left. It gives us a very detailed description of what they receive of favours and blessings, or misery and suffering. This makes us feel that it will all undoubtedly happen, and

especially as every detail is set before our eyes. The unbelievers are made to see their fate and that of the believers and hear what is said about them after detailing their misery: "*In times gone by, they overindulged in luxury and persisted in heinous sin, saying, 'What! When we have died and become mere dust and bones, are we to be raised up again? And our forefathers, too?'*" (Verses 45–48) The description gives the impression that the punishment is being meted out now and that life on earth is long gone, mentioned only to show how hideous and repugnant some people's way of life was.

Thus ends the first part of the *sūrah*. The second part discusses the question of faith in its entirety, placing particular emphasis on the main topic, i.e. resurrection. The *sūrah* then makes a number of highly effective touches, pinpointing matters that all people know and see, whatever their environment and level of experience. It cites the beginning of each person's life journey with the discharge of semen, and shows their death only to be replaced by a new generation. This is cited as evidence of the second life, which is just as easy and simple as the first one, which they all know. The *sūrah* then cites the evidence provided by plants and agriculture, which is an initiation of a certain form of life by God's will. Had He willed, it would not have come about and would not have yielded its fruit. Next, water is cited; this commodity is necessary for all life. Its availability is totally dependent on God's will since it is He who sends it down from the clouds. Had He willed, He would have made it salty, unsuitable for bringing about or sustaining life. Finally, fire is cited together with its basic material, the trees. At this point, a warning is given reminding them of the fire of hell which they doubt. All these images are familiar to them, and they are only asked to reflect on how they come about by God's will.

This part also speaks about the Qur'ān, which tells them about the inevitable event yet still they doubt its warnings. A very serious oath follows, emphasizing that these revelations constitute a noble reading preserved in a well-guarded record, touched only by purified angels.

As the *sūrah* draws to a close, it paints a very powerful scene of man's situation at the point of death, when his soul is in his throat. All those around him stand helpless, unable to assist. They know nothing about what is happening inside or to this person. As he is about to depart this

life, none other than God can do aught to him. He sees his path ahead, but he cannot say anything about what he sees.

The *sūrah* concludes by re-emphasizing the true news, adding further glorification of God, the Supreme: "*This is surely the indubitable truth. Extol, then, the glory of the name of your Lord, the Supreme.*" (Verses 95–96) It thus ensures that the beginning and the end form a perfect harmony.

Al-Wāqi'ah
(The Inevitable Event)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

When that which is certain to happen will have come to pass (1)

إِذَا وَقَعَتِ الْوَاقِعَةُ ﴿١﴾

no one will then deny its having come to pass, (2)

لَيْسَ لِوَقْعَتِهَا كَاذِبَةٌ ﴿٢﴾

abasing [some], exalting [others]. (3)

خَافِضَةٌ رَّافِعَةٌ ﴿٣﴾

When the earth is violently shaken (4)

إِذَا رُجَّتِ الْأَرْضُ رَجًّا ﴿٤﴾

and the mountains crumble away (5)

وَبُسَّتِ الْجِبَالُ بَسًّا ﴿٥﴾

and scatter abroad into fine dust, (6)

فَكَانَتْ هَبَاءً مُّنۢبَثًّا ﴿٦﴾

you shall be divided into three classes: (7)

وَكُنتُمْ أَزْوَاجًا ثَلَاثَةً ﴿٧﴾

There are the people of the right side: what people are they? (8)

فَأَصْحَابُ الْمَيْمَنَةِ مَا أَصْحَابُ الْمَيْمَنَةِ ﴿٨﴾

And the people of the left side: what people are they? (9)

وَأَصْحَابُ الْمَشْأَمَةِ مَا أَصْحَابُ الْمَشْأَمَةِ ﴿٩﴾

And there are those to the fore, who shall be foremost. (10)	وَٱلسَّٰبِقُونَ ٱلسَّٰبِقُونَ ﴿١٠﴾
These will be brought nearest to God, (11)	أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ ٱلْمُقَرَّبُونَ ﴿١١﴾
in gardens of bliss. (12)	فِى جَنَّٰتِ ٱلنَّعِيمِ ﴿١٢﴾
A good many of them are from earlier times (13)	ثُلَّةٌ مِّنَ ٱلْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿١٣﴾
and a few from later generations. (14)	وَقَلِيلٌ مِّنَ ٱلْءَاخِرِينَ ﴿١٤﴾
On gold-encrusted couches (15)	عَلَىٰ سُرُرٍ مَّوْضُونَةٍ ﴿١٥﴾
they will recline facing each other. (16)	مُّتَّكِـِٔينَ عَلَيْهَا مُتَقَٰبِلِينَ ﴿١٦﴾
Immortal youths shall wait upon them (17)	يَطُوفُ عَلَيْهِمْ وِلْدَٰنٌ مُّخَلَّدُونَ ﴿١٧﴾
with goblets, ewers, and cups filled with water from unsullied springs. (18)	بِأَكْوَابٍ وَأَبَارِيقَ وَكَأْسٍ مِّن مَّعِينٍ ﴿١٨﴾
From it they will not be dispersed, nor will they be in short supply. (19)	لَّا يُصَدَّعُونَ عَنْهَا وَلَا يُنزِفُونَ ﴿١٩﴾
And with fruit of any kind they may choose, (20)	وَفَٰكِهَةٍ مِّمَّا يَتَخَيَّرُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾
and with the meat of any fowl they may desire. (21)	وَلَحْمِ طَيْرٍ مِّمَّا يَشْتَهُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

There will be for them companions with large beautiful eyes (22)

وَحُورٌ عِينٌ ﴿٢٢﴾

like hidden pearls: (23)

كَأَمْثَالِ اللُّؤْلُؤِ الْمَكْنُونِ ﴿٢٣﴾

a reward for what they used to do. (24)

جَزَاءً بِمَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

There they will hear no idle talk, no sinful speech, (25)

لَا يَسْمَعُونَ فِيهَا لَغْوًا وَلَا تَأْثِيمًا ﴿٢٥﴾

only the saying, 'Peace! Peace'. (26)

إِلَّا قِيلًا سَلَامًا سَلَامًا ﴿٢٦﴾

As for those on the right, what people are they? (27)

وَأَصْحَابُ الْيَمِينِ مَا أَصْحَابُ الْيَمِينِ ﴿٢٧﴾

They will dwell amid thornless lote trees (28)

فِي سِدْرٍ مَخْضُودٍ ﴿٢٨﴾

and flower-clad acacias (29)

وَطَلْحٍ مَنْضُودٍ ﴿٢٩﴾

with extended shade, (30)

وَظِلٍّ مَمْدُودٍ ﴿٣٠﴾

constantly flowing water, (31)

وَمَاءٍ مَسْكُوبٍ ﴿٣١﴾

abundant fruits, (32)

وَفَاكِهَةٍ كَثِيرَةٍ ﴿٣٢﴾

unfailing, never out of reach, (33)

لَا مَقْطُوعَةٍ وَلَا مَمْنُوعَةٍ ﴿٣٣﴾

[reclining on] couches raised high. (34)

وَفُرُشٍ مَّرْفُوعَةٍ ﴿٣٤﴾

We will have brought forth [their mates] in perfect creation, (35)

إِنَّآ أَنشَأْنَٰهُنَّ إِنشَآءً ﴿٣٥﴾

making them virgins, (36)

فَجَعَلْنَٰهُنَّ أَبْكَارًا ﴿٣٦﴾

full of love, of matching age, (37)

عُرُبًا أَتْرَابًا ﴿٣٧﴾

for those on the right. (38)

لِّأَصْحَٰبِ ٱلْيَمِينِ ﴿٣٨﴾

A good many of them are from earlier times (39)

ثُلَّةٌ مِّنَ ٱلْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿٣٩﴾

and a good many from later generations. (40)

وَثُلَّةٌ مِّنَ ٱلْءَاخِرِينَ ﴿٤٠﴾

And those on the left, what people are they? (41)

وَأَصْحَٰبُ ٱلشِّمَالِ مَآ أَصْحَٰبُ ٱلشِّمَالِ ﴿٤١﴾

They will dwell amid scorching wind and scalding water (42)

فِى سَمُومٍ وَحَمِيمٍ ﴿٤٢﴾

in the shadows of black smoke, (43)

وَظِلٍّ مِّن يَحْمُومٍ ﴿٤٣﴾

neither cool nor refreshing. (44)

لَّا بَارِدٍ وَلَا كَرِيمٍ ﴿٤٤﴾

In times gone by, they overindulged in luxury (45)

إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا۟ قَبْلَ ذَٰلِكَ مُتْرَفِينَ ﴿٤٥﴾

and persisted in heinous sin, (46)

وَكَانُوا۟ يُصِرُّونَ عَلَى ٱلْحِنثِ ٱلْعَظِيمِ ﴿٤٦﴾

saying, 'What! When we have died and become mere dust and bones, are we to be raised up again? (47)

وَكَانُوا۟ يَقُولُونَ أَئِذَا مِتْنَا وَكُنَّا تُرَابًا وَعِظَٰمًا أَءِنَّا لَمَبْعُوثُونَ ﴿٤٧﴾

And our forefathers, too? (48)

أَوَءَابَآؤُنَا ٱلْأَوَّلُونَ ﴿٤٨﴾

Say: 'All people of the earliest and latest generations (49)

قُلْ إِنَّ ٱلْأَوَّلِينَ وَٱلْءَاخِرِينَ ﴿٤٩﴾

will indeed be gathered together at an appointed time on a specific day. (50)

لَمَجْمُوعُونَ إِلَىٰ مِيقَٰتِ يَوْمٍ مَّعْلُومٍ ﴿٥٠﴾

Then, you who have gone astray and denied the truth (51)

ثُمَّ إِنَّكُمْ أَيُّهَا ٱلضَّآلُّونَ ٱلْمُكَذِّبُونَ ﴿٥١﴾

will eat from the fruit of the Zaqqūm tree, (52)

لَءَاكِلُونَ مِن شَجَرٍ مِّن زَقُّومٍ ﴿٥٢﴾

filling your bellies with it, (53)

فَمَالِـُٔونَ مِنْهَا ٱلْبُطُونَ ﴿٥٣﴾

and will drink scalding water; (54)

فَشَٰرِبُونَ عَلَيْهِ مِنَ ٱلْحَمِيمِ ﴿٥٤﴾

yet you will drink it like insatiably thirsty camels drink.' (55)

فَشَٰرِبُونَ شُرْبَ ٱلْهِيمِ ﴿٥٥﴾

Such will be their dwelling place on the Day of Judgement. (56)

هَٰذَا نُزُلُهُمْ يَوْمَ ٱلدِّينِ ﴿٥٦﴾

نَحْنُ خَلَقْنَٰكُمْ فَلَوْلَا تُصَدِّقُونَ ﴿٥٧﴾

It is We who have created you: will you not believe? (57)

أَفَرَءَيْتُم مَّا تُمْنُونَ ﴿٥٨﴾

Consider the semen you discharge: (58)

ءَأَنتُمْ تَخْلُقُونَهُۥٓ أَمْ نَحْنُ ٱلْخَٰلِقُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

do you create it, or are We the Creator? (59)

نَحْنُ قَدَّرْنَا بَيْنَكُمُ ٱلْمَوْتَ وَمَا نَحْنُ بِمَسْبُوقِينَ ﴿٦٠﴾

We have decreed that death shall be among you. Nothing can prevent Us (60)

عَلَىٰٓ أَن نُّبَدِّلَ أَمْثَٰلَكُمْ وَنُنشِئَكُمْ فِى مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٦١﴾

from replacing you by others like yourselves or bringing you into being anew in a way unknown to you. (61)

وَلَقَدْ عَلِمْتُمُ ٱلنَّشْأَةَ ٱلْأُولَىٰ فَلَوْلَا تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٦٢﴾

You have learned how you have come into being in the first instance. Why, then, do you not reflect? (62)

أَفَرَءَيْتُم مَّا تَحْرُثُونَ ﴿٦٣﴾

Consider the seeds you sow in the ground: (63)

ءَأَنتُمْ تَزْرَعُونَهُۥٓ أَمْ نَحْنُ ٱلزَّٰرِعُونَ ﴿٦٤﴾

is it you who makes them grow, or We? (64)

لَوْ نَشَآءُ لَجَعَلْنَٰهُ حُطَٰمًا فَظَلْتُمْ تَفَكَّهُونَ ﴿٦٥﴾

Were it Our will, We could turn it into chaff and leave you to wail, (65)

إِنَّا لَمُغْرَمُونَ ﴿٦٦﴾

'We are burdened with debt; (66)

we have been deprived.' (67)

بَلْ نَحْنُ مَحْرُومُونَ ﴿٦٧﴾

Consider the water you drink: (68)

أَفَرَءَيْتُمُ ٱلْمَآءَ ٱلَّذِى تَشْرَبُونَ ﴿٦٨﴾

is it you who brings it down from the clouds, or We? (69)

ءَأَنتُمْ أَنزَلْتُمُوهُ مِنَ ٱلْمُزْنِ أَمْ نَحْنُ ٱلْمُنزِلُونَ ﴿٦٩﴾

Were it Our will, We could make it salty and bitter. Why, then, do you not give thanks? (70)

لَوْ نَشَآءُ جَعَلْنَٰهُ أُجَاجًا فَلَوْلَا تَشْكُرُونَ ﴿٧٠﴾

Consider the fire you kindle: (71)

أَفَرَءَيْتُمُ ٱلنَّارَ ٱلَّتِى تُورُونَ ﴿٧١﴾

is it you who grows its tree, or We? (72)

ءَأَنتُمْ أَنشَأْتُمْ شَجَرَتَهَآ أَمْ نَحْنُ ٱلْمُنشِـُٔونَ ﴿٧٢﴾

We made it a reminder for man, and a comfort for desert travellers. (73)

نَحْنُ جَعَلْنَٰهَا تَذْكِرَةً وَمَتَٰعًا لِّلْمُقْوِينَ ﴿٧٣﴾

Extol, then, the glory of the name of your Lord, the Supreme. (74)

فَسَبِّحْ بِٱسْمِ رَبِّكَ ٱلْعَظِيمِ ﴿٧٤﴾

I do swear by the positions of the stars (75)

فَلَآ أُقْسِمُ بِمَوَٰقِعِ ٱلنُّجُومِ ﴿٧٥﴾

– a mighty oath, if you but knew it! – (76)

وَإِنَّهُۥ لَقَسَمٌ لَّوْ تَعْلَمُونَ عَظِيمٌ ﴿٧٦﴾

إِنَّهُۥ لَقُرْءَانٌ كَرِيمٌ ﴿٧٧﴾

that this is indeed a most honourable Qur'ān, (77)

فِى كِتَٰبٍ مَّكْنُونٍ ﴿٧٨﴾

in a well-guarded record (78)

لَّا يَمَسُّهُۥٓ إِلَّا ٱلْمُطَهَّرُونَ ﴿٧٩﴾

that only the purified can touch: (79)

تَنزِيلٌ مِّن رَّبِّ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٨٠﴾

a revelation from the Lord of all the worlds. (80)

أَفَبِهَٰذَا ٱلْحَدِيثِ أَنتُم مُّدْهِنُونَ ﴿٨١﴾

Would you look on this discourse with disdain? (81)

وَتَجْعَلُونَ رِزْقَكُمْ أَنَّكُمْ تُكَذِّبُونَ ﴿٨٢﴾

Do you make it your livelihood that you persistently deny it? (82)

فَلَوْلَآ إِذَا بَلَغَتِ ٱلْحُلْقُومَ ﴿٨٣﴾

When the soul [of a dying person] comes up to the throat (83)

وَأَنتُمْ حِينَئِذٍ تَنظُرُونَ ﴿٨٤﴾

while you are helplessly looking on (84)

وَنَحْنُ أَقْرَبُ إِلَيْهِ مِنكُمْ وَلَٰكِن لَّا تُبْصِرُونَ ﴿٨٥﴾

We are closer to him than you, although you do not see Us. (85)

فَلَوْلَآ إِن كُنتُمْ غَيْرَ مَدِينِينَ ﴿٨٦﴾

Why, if you think you are not to be judged, (86)

تَرْجِعُونَهَآ إِن كُنتُمْ صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿٨٧﴾

can you not restore that [ebbing life], if what you claim is true? (87)

If that dying person is one of those who are drawn close to God, (88)	فَأَمَّآ إِن كَانَ مِنَ ٱلْمُقَرَّبِينَ ﴿٨٨﴾
he will have repose, fulfilment and a garden of bliss. (89)	فَرَوْحٌ وَرَيْحَانٌ وَجَنَّتُ نَعِيمٍ ﴿٨٩﴾
If he is one of those on the right, (90)	وَأَمَّآ إِن كَانَ مِنْ أَصْحَٰبِ ٱلْيَمِينِ ﴿٩٠﴾
a greeting of peace will welcome you by the ones on the right. (91)	فَسَلَٰمٌ لَّكَ مِنْ أَصْحَٰبِ ٱلْيَمِينِ ﴿٩١﴾
But if he happens to be one of those who denied the truth and went astray, (92)	وَأَمَّآ إِن كَانَ مِنَ ٱلْمُكَذِّبِينَ ٱلضَّآلِّينَ ﴿٩٢﴾
he will be welcomed with scalding water, (93)	فَنُزُلٌ مِّنْ حَمِيمٍ ﴿٩٣﴾
and the heat of a blazing fire. (94)	وَتَصْلِيَةُ جَحِيمٍ ﴿٩٤﴾
This is surely the indubitable truth. (95)	إِنَّ هَٰذَا لَهُوَ حَقُّ ٱلْيَقِينِ ﴿٩٥﴾
Extol, then, the glory of the name of your Lord, the Supreme. (96)	فَسَبِّحْ بِٱسْمِ رَبِّكَ ٱلْعَظِيمِ ﴿٩٦﴾

Unfinished Conditional

When that which is certain to happen will have come to pass no one will then deny its having come to pass, abasing [some], exalting [others]. When the earth is violently shaken and the mountains crumble away and scatter abroad into fine dust. (Verses 1–6)

This opening is clearly intended to add suspense to its presentation of this awesome but inevitable event. It employs a special style that clearly indicates this. Twice, it begins a conditional sentence, employing the word 'when', without finishing what the result or the outcome will be. It first says: "*When that which is certain to happen will have come to pass no one will then deny its having come to pass, abasing [some], exalting [others].*" (Verses 1–3) But it does not say what will take place when this inevitable event comes to pass. It simply says there can be no denying that it will happen. Without saying what comes next, the *sūrah* commences a new beginning with another conditional sentence: "*When the earth is violently shaken and the mountains crumble away and scatter abroad into fine dust.*" (Verses 4–6) Again, the *sūrah* does not tell us what happens after this exceedingly alarming event. Thus we are left with the impression that all this is merely an introduction to results that are so frightful that no words can adequately describe them.

This special style particularly suits the extremely frightening image the *sūrah* opens with. The *sūrah* denotes the event of resurrection by the term *al-wāqi'ah*, which primarily refers to something that falls hard. The very sound of the word gives the impression of a heavy object dropping from a high position and then settling where it cannot be moved or removed: "*No one will then deny its having come to pass.*" (Verse 2) As this heavy object falls, we expect it to produce some turmoil or shaking up. This expectation is fulfilled as the event is described as "*abasing [some] exalting [others].*" (Verse 3) It will certainly put down people who were looked up to during their lives on earth, and it will elevate others who were thought of as commanding little respect. Standards and values will be set straight in God's scale, after they have been out of balance in this world.

The frightening event then begins to take shape in the very structure of the earth, which people always think to be firm and stable. The event shows it being violently shaken, a reality that fits well with the sound of the fall. Firm and solid mountains are transformed into heaps of dust that the wind blows away: "*When the earth is violently shaken and the mountains crumble away and scatter abroad into fine dust.*" How ignorant and feeble-minded those people are who face this fearful prospect in full denial of the Day of Judgement, refusing to believe in God's oneness when it produces such an effect on the earth and its mountains.

Three Groups

As this strongly shaking scene concludes, we are then introduced to the effects of this inevitable event as some people are elevated while others are abased. This takes place when everyone faces their different fate:

> *You shall be divided into three classes: There are the people of the right side: what people are they? And the people of the left side: what people are they? And there are those to the fore, who shall be foremost.* (Verses 7–10)

Here, people are divided into three groups, unlike in most other Qur'ānic statements where they are shown to be in two groups. The *sūrah* first mentions the people of the right side, but does not give us any details about them. Instead, a question is asked about them, enhancing the feeling of expectation: "*There are the people of the right side: what people are they?*" (Verse 8) The same method is used for the opposite group: "*And the people of the left side: what people are they?*" (Verse 9) The third group is then mentioned, and these are the ones to the fore. They are described by the same quality of being ahead of all: "*there are those to the fore, who shall be foremost.*" (Verse 10) It is as if the *sūrah* says these are the ones, and this is enough. No further description is necessary, it would add nothing.

The *sūrah* then mentions their position with their Lord and describes in detail what blessings He has prepared for them. This is all described in a way that the addressees can understand, in light of their own knowledge and experience:

> *These will be brought nearest to God, in gardens of bliss. A good many of them are from earlier times and a few from later generations. On gold-encrusted couches they will recline facing each other. Immortal youths shall wait upon them with goblets, ewers, and cups filled with water from unsullied springs. From it they will not be dispersed, nor will they be in short supply. And with fruit of any kind they may choose, and with the meat of any fowl they may desire. There will be for them companions with large beautiful eyes like hidden pearls: a reward for what they used to do. There they will hear no idle talk, no sinful speech, only the saying, 'Peace! Peace'.* (Verses 11–26)

The *sūrah* begins this detailed account by mentioning the greatest aspect of their elevated position, the bliss of being close to their Lord: "*These will be brought nearest to God, in gardens of bliss.*" (Verses 11–12) The gardens of bliss, with all that they contain, is nothing compared to that topmost favour of being nearest to God.

The *sūrah* takes a short pause here to say who achieves this grade. Thus, we are told: "*A good many of them are from earlier times and a few from later generations.*" (Verses 13–14) They are, then, the chosen ones, constituting a limited number. Most of them belong to earlier generations, but a minority come from later ones. Views differ as to which are the earlier generations and which are the later ones. The first view suggests that the earlier generations refer to those who attained to a high degree of faith from among the communities that lived prior to the advent of Islam, while the few from the later generations refers to the ones who were the first to accept Islam and strive hard for its cause. The second view says that both the majority and the minority belong to the followers of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him), with the ones of '*earlier times*' belonging to its first generations, and the others to later ones.

This second view is the one preferred by Ibn Kathīr, who cites in support quotations from al-Ḥasan and Ibn Sīrīn. Al-Ḥasan is reported to have said after reading these two verses: "Those to the fore are gone, but we pray to God to include us among the people of the right side." Then he explained the meaning of "*A good many of them are from earlier times*," saying that these are "from the earlier generations of the Muslim community." Muḥammad ibn Sīrīn is reported to have said after reading these two verses: "Scholars used to say, or to hope, that they all belong to the Muslim community."

Now the *sūrah* begins to enumerate the types of luxuries they will enjoy in heaven. These are of course of the types they can imagine and visualize. Beyond these there are other luxuries and aspects of happiness and bliss, which they will recognize when they are ready to appreciate them in their future lives. These are things 'no eye has ever seen, no ear has ever heard of and no mind has ever imagined.'

"*On gold-encrusted couches they will recline facing each other.*" (Verses 15–16) They are comfortable, free of all worries and preoccupations,

reassured as to the continuity of their happiness, knowing that it will never end. Hence, they come together, in an atmosphere of mutual love. "*Immortal youths shall wait upon them.*" (Verse 17) These youths are unaffected by the passage of time; they retain their youthful looks. They go round carrying "*goblets, ewers, and cups filled with water from unsullied springs.*" (Verse 18) Their drink is made of pure wine that causes no intoxication. "*From it they will not be dispersed, nor will they be in short supply.*" (Verse 19) They are not turned away from it, nor will it ever be used up. Everything here is always plentiful; nothing is ever out of stock. "*And with fruit of any kind they may choose, and with the meat of any fowl they may desire.*" (Verses 20–21) Nothing is unavailable, while everything is given in the way those happy ones may desire. "*There will be for them companions with large beautiful eyes like hidden pearls.*" (Verses 22–23) Hidden pearls are those that are carefully treasured. No hand has ever put a needle through them, and no eye has ever cast a piercing look at them. A host of gentle connotations, both mental and physical, are implied in this description of these companions with their large beautiful eyes. All this is "*a reward for what they used to do.*" (Verse 24) It is a reward for what is done during that stage of life where action is required. In that life, nothing people do attains perfection, but here in this life, in heaven, the reward is absolutely perfect.

Moreover, they are greeted gently in a way that disdains all idle talk: "*There they will hear no idle talk, no sinful speech, only the saying, 'Peace! Peace'.*" (Verses 25–26) Their lives are peaceful; peace that spreads all around them. They are saluted by the angels with a greeting of peace, and they exchange the same greeting with one another, and an even better greeting of peace is extended to them from the Lord of Grace. It is all then a life of peace.

The Other Groups

The *sūrah* follows this account of the superior group with a similarly detailed one of the second group, to which a quick reference was made in the opening of the *sūrah*. The details of their situation in the life to come are now provided at the right point, beginning with a repetition

of the same question posed at the outset that gives a sense of seriousness and awe: "*As for those on the right, what people are they?*" (Verse 27).

This group are also enjoying a luxurious and happy life, but its description gives a sense of nomadic roughness. It answers all the needs of a nomadic people as they can best imagine a life of comfort and bliss. Thus, "*They will dwell amid thornless lote trees.*" (Verse 28). The lote tree is known for its thorns, but here it is thornless. "*And flower-clad acacias.*" (Verse 29) The acacia is a thorny type of leguminous tree well known in the Hijaz region of Arabia. However, the acacia trees in heaven are without thorns, have abundant fruit and are so situated as to enable real comfort. "*With extended shade, constantly flowing water.*" (Verses 30–31) These are all types of comfort dreamt of by the bedouin. "*Abundant fruits, unfailing, never out of reach.*" (Verses 32–33) These are left undetailed here, after having already outlined those types well-known by name to the bedouins. "*[Reclining on] couches raised high.*" (Verse 34) These couches are not described as gold-encrusted, nor as having fine embroidery. They are merely 'raised high'. Raising high contains a double meaning, physical and mental, both of which complement each other. As they are raised high, both meanings converge. In position, they are far removed from all types of impurity, kept clean. Mental elevation, on the other hand, is also far removed from all that stains. Therefore, the next aspect of their blessing describes the companions they have in heaven: "*We will have brought forth [their mates] in perfect creation.*" (Verse 35) These mates are either new ones, referring to the mates God assigns them from among the creatures that originally dwell in heaven, or they are their wives in this world, after they have been resurrected as virgins in the prime of youth, "*making them virgins.*" (Verse 36) They are "*full of love, of matching age.*" (Verse 37) And they are specially assigned and devoted "*for those on the right.*" (Verse 38)

These people on the right consist of "*A good many of them are from earlier times and a good many from later generations.*" (Verses 39–40) This means that they are greater in number than the first group of people to the fore, taking into account the two views we explained in reference to earlier and later generations.

The *sūrah* now speaks about the third group, the people on the left, to whom a general reference was made earlier on:

> *And those on the left, what people are they? They will dwell amid scorching wind and scalding water in the shadows of black smoke, neither cool nor refreshing. In times gone by, they overindulged in luxury and persisted in heinous sin, saying, 'What! When we have died and become mere dust and bones, are we to be raised up again? And our forefathers, too? Say: 'All people of the earliest and latest generations will indeed be gathered together at an appointed time on a specific day. Then, you who have gone astray and denied the truth will eat from the fruit of the Zaqqūm tree, filling your bellies with it, and will drink scalding water; yet you will drink it like insatiably thirsty camels drink.' Such will be their dwelling place on the Day of Judgement.* (Verses 41–56)

While the people on the right enjoy extended shade and constantly flowing water, these on the left "*dwell amid scorching wind and scalding water in the shadows of black smoke, neither cool nor refreshing.*" (Verses 42–44) The whole atmosphere is of a scorching heat that penetrates and burns the skin. The water they have to drink is also scalding, giving no refreshment. They also have shade, but it is no more than the shadows of black smoke. It is a shade painted in irony, for such shade is devoid of coolness, inviting no rest, and giving no sensation other than that produced by suffocating heat. Such hardship is a fitting requital, for "*in times gone by, they overindulged in luxury.*" (Verse 45) The absence of comfort for those who are used to indulging and excessing in luxury is hard indeed. They also "*persisted in heinous sin*", associating partners with God. The Arabic word used here for sin is *ḥinth*, which means 'breach, violation'. It implies, thus, a reference to the pledge given by human nature to maintain faith in God's oneness and not to associate partners with Him. They are certainly in breach of that pledge. They used to say: "*What! When we have died and become mere dust and bones, are we to be raised up again? And our forefathers, too?*" (Verses 47–48) The *sūrah* clearly uses the past tense in these last two points, saying that they persisted in sin and denied the resurrection, thus treating this present life of the addressees as though it has already ended. In other words, this scene of suffering is made to appear as though it is presently occurring.

After all, this whole life is no more than a twinkling of the eye, whilst the life to come is ultimate and permanent.

The *sūrah* seizes this appropriate moment to answer their question, which they unfold in an exaggerated sense of incredulity: "*Say: All people of the earliest and latest generations will indeed be gathered together at an appointed time on a specific day.*" (Verses 49–50) The specific day is the one that has just been painted. It has been shown as though they are enduring it right now.

The *sūrah* resumes the description of the suffering that awaits those who deny the truth of God's oneness: "*Then, you who have gone astray and denied the truth will eat from the fruit of the Zaqqūm tree.*" (Verses 51–52) No one knows anything about the Zaqqūm tree other than the description God gives us in another *sūrah*, stating that "*its fruit is like devils' heads.*" (37: 65) Again no one has ever seen devils' heads, but the very phrase gives us a clear sense. Besides, the very name, Zaqqūm, implies a hard, rough surface with thorns that pierce hands and throats. This is in contrast to the thornless lote trees and flower-clad acacias that the people on the right enjoy. Although the fruit of the Zaqqūm tree looks like devils' heads, these people will eat it "*filling your bellies with it.*" (Verse 53) Hunger is overpowering. Hard and thorny food will inevitably require a drink to ease its swallowing and refresh the stomach. They, however, "*will drink scalding water.*" (Verse 54) Such a drink can never refresh or satisfy a thirsty person. Yet these people "*will drink it like insatiably thirsty camels drink.*" (Verse 55) These camels have a well known illness making them always thirsty. "*Such will be their dwelling place on the Day of Judgement.*" (Verse 56) A dwelling place is one that is supposed to give comfort and a sense of permanent settlement, but this dwelling for those on the left gives neither. This is how they are welcomed and this is the place assigned to them on the Day of Judgement, which they held in doubt, always rejecting what the Qur'ān told them about it. They also associated partners with God, disbelieving His warnings of what they may suffer on that day.

Thus ends the first part of the *sūrah* which has given us a detailed account of people's fates on the day when the inevitable takes place.

Stating the Case

The second part of the *sūrah* aims to establish the Islamic faith in full, but the issue of resurrection and future life receives the main focus. This provides an example of the Qur'ānic method of addressing human nature, utilizing indicators that encourage faith. It makes a gentle address to people's hearts as it presents great issues in an easy to understand way.

The Qur'ān presents phenomena that are very familiar to us and often repeated in our lives as great facts setting clear universal laws. It, thus, moulds this into a profound and comprehensive faith giving a complete concept of existence. It also uses such phenomena as a method for reflection, alerting minds and souls and awakening feelings. Thus people are able to clearly understand universal phenomena that they may often be oblivious to, despite the fact that they are always before their eyes. They can also be better aware of wonders that take place within their own selves.

The Qur'ān does not rely on a few individual miracles in its address to mankind. It does not require people to look for miracles and signs that are far removed from them, their lives and immediate natural phenomena. It does not lead them through sophisticated philosophical theories, or complex mental tasks, or through scientific experiments that no one can undertake in order to present them with the faith it advocates.

They themselves are of God's own making, and the natural phenomena in their immediate world are all His creation. There is a miracle in everything He makes. This Qur'ān is His own book. The One who takes them by the hand to such miracles within themselves and in the world around them is simply highlighting to them what is familiar and happening before their own eyes, yet they do not appreciate this because of long familiarity with them. He opens their eyes to these so that they can appreciate their great secret, the secret of His creative power and His absolute oneness. It is the secret of the eternal law that works within their own constitution and throughout the universe around them. It is the law that embodies the proofs of divine faith, alerting their nature to these proofs.

This is the line the *sūrah* follows in its second part. It shows them signs of God's limitless power in their own creation, in the plants they cultivate with their own hands, in the water they drink and the fire they light. These are among the simplest things they see all the time. It describes the approaching end of their lives on earth and the beginning of the next life in the world beyond. This is the inevitable moment everyone will have to face. At this moment, all are powerless. All creatures stand face to face before God's limitless power, as He executes His will. At this moment, all excuses are false. Only the truth prevails.

The method of the Qur'ān in addressing human nature is itself proof of its own source. It is the same source that gave rise to the universe. The same method of structure applies to the Qur'ān as it does to the universe, whereby elementary materials are used to produce gigantic and complex entities. Scientists think that the atom is the material from which the universe is built, and the cell is the unit used to build life. Yet infinitely small as they are, the atom and the cell are miracles in their own right. Here, the Qur'ān uses some simple scenes that have long been familiar to man to build the most profound religious faith and the broadest concept of existence. These scenes or observations are part of every human being's experience: newborns, plants, water, fire and death. Which human being, indeed which cave dweller has not witnessed the birth of a child, a new plant shoot, water falling, fire being lit, or a moment of death? The Qur'ān uses such scenes to present its faith, because it addresses every human being in every social environment. Yet these very simple scenes, as well as the reference to the positions of stars, are among the most important universal truths and divine secrets. In their profound simplicity, they address the nature of every human being; and in their essence they have been, and will always remain, the subject of study by the greatest scientists.

The positions of stars refer to the way the universe is designed. The origin of human life is the secret of all secrets, and the origin of plants is, like the origin of animal life, the mother of all miracles. Water is the essence of life, and fire is the miracle behind human civilization. This method of building the case for faith is not one man uses. When human beings address such issues, they do not pay attention to such elementary

materials. Should they even do so, they still do not present them in such a gentle and easy way. On the contrary, they employ an abstract, complex logic, that may only be grasped by the intellectual elite.

God's method is the one we see in this *sūrah*: using basic materials to build faith in total ease and simplicity. He does the same with the universe, building it with basic materials. The same method appears in both, and the Creator's stamp is clearly evident in both.

The Beginning and End

It is We who have created you: will you not believe? Consider the semen you discharge: do you create it, or are We the Creator? We have decreed that death shall be among you. Nothing can prevent Us from replacing you by others like yourselves or bringing you into being anew in a way unknown to you. You have learned how you have come into being in the first instance. Why, then, do you not reflect? (Verses 57–62)

This whole issue of faith is the same as the first instance of creation and the end, the giving of life and inevitable death. It is familiar, seen at all times. How come, then, that people do not believe that it is God who creates them? The weight of this truth on human nature is too heavy for anyone to challenge: "*It is We who have created you: will you not believe?*" (Verse 57)

"*Consider the semen you discharge: do you create it, or are We the Creator?*" (Verses 58–59) Man's role in the process of creation is no more than the man depositing his seed in the woman's body. Their respective roles are finished at that. From then on, the hand of God takes over. It works on its own, giving the embryo growth and development, building its skeleton and dressing it up, then breathing spirit into it. Right from the first moment, and at every subsequent moment, a miracle occurs that remains totally unknown to man. Indeed, man does not know how it occurs, let alone plays a role in it.

This measure of reflection on creation is understood by all people. It is enough to appreciate the miracle that takes place and reflect on its message. In fact, the story of this single cell, from the moment it is deposited until it becomes a full-fledged human being, surpasses all

imagination. The human mind would never have believed it, except for the fact that it occurs with all people as witnesses.

This single cell begins to multiply, and within a short period of time the number of cells reaches many millions, divided into groups with different characteristics. Each group is assigned its own task, to produce a particular aspect of the human being: one group produces bones, another muscles, a third nerves, and a different one produces the skin, while others produce nerves, etc. Another group of cells make an eye, another a tongue and a third an ear. A more specialized group will produce glands. Each group knows its position of work. The cells which make an eye will never miss its position so as to produce the eye, say, in the abdomen or the foot. Had these cells been transplanted so as to be based in the abdomen, they would make an eye there. However, each cell is guided to its proper place, and we never find a case where the eye's cells produce an eye in the abdomen, or the ear's cells produce an ear in the foot. All function properly to produce a human being, who is given the best shape and form, under God's care. Humans have no role in all this.

Such is the beginning; but the end is in no way less miraculous or amazing, even though it is so familiar a sight: "*We have decreed that death shall be among you. Nothing can prevent Us.*" (Verse 60) What is death, the inevitable end of every living thing? What is it? How does it occur? How come it overpowers all? It is nothing less than God's decree. Hence, no one can escape it. No one can spring ahead of it so as to miss it. It is a stage in the chain of existence that must be completed: "*Nothing can prevent Us from replacing you by others like yourselves,*" to be in charge of the earth after you have gone. God who has decreed death has also decreed life. He has decreed that people shall die, and that He will replace them with others like them, until the time span decreed for this stage of life comes to its end. Once it is over, then the second life begins: "*or bringing you into being anew in a way unknown to you.*" (Verse 61) This is in the realm that lies beyond the reach of our perception. It is a great realm about which humans know nothing other than what God is pleased to tell them. At that point, the journey comes to its end.

Such is how people are brought into being a second time: "*You have learned how you have come into being in the first instance. Why, then, do*

you not reflect?" (Verse 62) The two are not dissimilar in nature. There is nothing strange about it.

In such a simple approach, and with such ease the Qur'ān portrays the two great events of bringing humans into being. With such ease and simplicity, it makes human nature face the logic it knows well. It cannot dispute this logic because it is based on its own basic facts and on what people see in their own lives. It is an approach that is free of complication, abstraction and sophistication. It is the approach of God, the Creator of man and the universe who bestowed the Qur'ān from on high.

Plant, Water and Fire

Once more the Qur'ān, in perfect ease and simplicity, puts before people something which is well known to them and which they repeatedly see. It shows how God's hand works to bring it about, showing them the miracle they overlook when it is always happening in front of their very own eyes:

> *Consider the seeds you sow in the ground: is it you who makes them grow, or We? Were it Our will, We could turn it into chaff and leave you to wail, 'We are burdened with debt; we have been deprived.'* (Verses 63–67)

What role do humans play in plant growth that culminates in fruition? They certainly till the earth and plant the seeds made by God, but that is about it. Their role is then finished, leaving the matter entirely to God's hand. It is He who completes this miraculous work.

The seed or the grain begins its journey to reproduce its kind, moving on like one who knows the way, stage after stage, one who will never commit the like of a human error, who will never change course or deviate from the path. It is the hand of God that guides it throughout this remarkable journey. No one could have ever believed this miracle, and no mind could have imagined it; yet it happens all the time and everyone of us sees it in one form or another. How else could anyone have believed that a wheat grain incorporates a stalk and leaves, as well

as an ear holding together a large number of grains? Who could have imagined that a date stone can produce such a large palm tree, with all that it contains?

What mind could have gone so far as to imagine this amazing wonder, had it not been for the fact that it happens before our very eyes? Can any person claim any role in producing this miracle other than planting the seeds and grains which are of God's own making?

Yet people say: "We have planted" when they have not gone beyond laying the seeds. As for the miracle that shoots out and grows, it is all of God's making. Had He willed, it would not have started its journey, or would not have completed it. Had He willed, He would have turned it into chaff even before it yielded its crop. It is by God's will that the seed and grain progress along the way to the end of their respective journeys. Had any of this not taken place, people would say: "*We are burdened with debt; we have been deprived.*" (Verses 66–67) It is God who, in His grace, grants them the fruits of their plants, allowing the plant to complete its cycle of life, which is similar to that which a human seed goes through from the moment it is discharged. Both are pictures of life as God makes it.

Such is the first time life comes into being. Why should a second time be thought strange?

> *Consider the water you drink: is it you who brings it down from the clouds, or We? Were it Our will, We could make it salty and bitter. Why, then, do you not give thanks?* (Verses 68–70)

Water is the source of life, its most essential component. God has so willed that without water no life is possible. What role does man play with water? Is it anything beyond the fact that he drinks it? The One who made water out of the elements that produce it, and who caused it to fall from the clouds bearing it, is none other than God – limitless is He in His glory. It is He who has made water sweet. Had He willed otherwise, He could have made it '*salty and bitter*', undrinkable, and unable to produce life. Is it not right then that they should express their gratitude to God for having willed it so?

Those who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān realized that the very water that falls from the clouds was essential for their lives. They were always delighted to see it falling. Indeed, talking about it gave them pleasure; they even sang its praises in their poetry. Human progress and civilization has in no way reduced the importance of water; on the contrary, it has almost doubled. Scientists who try to understand how water first came about realize its importance to a higher degree. Thus we see that water is the focus of attention for a bedouin in the desert as well as for a scientist in his laboratory.

> *Consider the fire you kindle: is it you who grows its tree, or We? We made it a reminder for man, and a comfort for desert travellers* (Verses 71–73)

The discovery of fire was a greatly important event in mankind's life. It was perhaps its most important event as it signalled the beginning of civilization. Fire, however, has become so familiar that it stirs no interest. Man certainly kindles fire, but who grows the tree that becomes its fuel? The *sūrah* has already mentioned plants, and trees are a type of plant. Yet another point is mentioned by the reference to '*its tree*' The Arabs used to ignite fire by rubbing a branch of one tree against another from a different tree, in the way still used in some primitive social environments. This, thus makes this description a close parallel of their own experience. As for the miracle of fire and its secret which scientists study, these are areas that deserve more attention. The mention of fire here is also used as a reminder of the fire of hell: "*We made it a reminder for man,*" reminding man of the life to come. God has also made fire "*a comfort for desert travellers.*" (Verse 73) This last point was particularly relevant to the Arabs addressed by the Qur'ān, as it referred to their own life experience.

The *sūrah* now points to the ultimate truth that all these facts lead to: God's Lordship of the universe and His ultimate power that now manifests itself, in all its glory, to human nature. It instructs the Prophet to recognize this truth, give it its due, and bring it to the forefront so that it exercises its profound influence on people's hearts: "*Extol, then, the glory of the name of your Lord, the Supreme.*" (Verse 74)

A Great Oath

Now the *sūrah* directs its address to those who denied the truth of the Qur'ān in another way, providing a relationship between it and the universe in a great oath by God, the Lord of all the worlds:

> *I do swear by the positions of the stars – a mighty oath, if you but knew it! – that this is indeed a most honourable Qur'ān, in a well-guarded record that only the purified can touch: a revelation from the Lord of all the worlds.* (Verses 75–80)

Those addressed by the Qur'ān at the time of its revelation knew no more about the positions of the stars than what they could see with the naked eye. Therefore, the *sūrah* tells them that the oath already made was a mighty one, even though they did not know it at the time. Today, we appreciate the greatness of this oath far more than they did, but we too know only very little about the greatness of the positions of the stars. The little we have discovered with our seemingly advanced observatories and allegedly powerful telescopes tells us that one of the countless clusters in open space, the one that constitutes the galaxy that contains our solar system, includes one billion stars.[1]

> Astronomers say that some of these stars and planets, which number many billions, can be seen with the naked eye, while others can only be seen with powerful telescopes. Others still can only be sensed by such very powerful telescopes. All these run in their respective orbits in space. The possibility of a magnetic field of one of these stars coming close to another, or of a planet crashing into another, is as remote as that of a boat in the Mediterranean crashing into one travelling in the Indian Ocean, when both are travelling in the same direction at the same speed. The chances of such a crash ever taking place are so remote that it is certainly impossible.[2]

1. In its shorter version, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* mentions that "The Milky Way system contains hundreds of billions of stars and large amounts of interstellar gas and dust." It is well known that the earth's solar system is part of the Milky Way galaxy. The author's mention that it includes one billion stars was perhaps the estimate at the time he wrote. – Editor's note.

2. Nawfal, A.R., *Allah wal-'Ilm al-Ḥadīth*, Cairo, (n.d.), p. 33.

Every star in its position, which is so distant from its sister stars, is placed there in accordance with God's wisdom and careful measure. Each interacts with other stars and planets to produce a measured equilibrium between all these entities floating in space. All this is part of the greatness of the positions of the stars. It goes far beyond the knowledge of those who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān. At the same time, it is immeasurably less than the total truth of the greatness of stars and their positions.

"*I do swear by the positions of the stars – a mighty oath, if you but knew it!*" (Verses 75–76) These verses make an oath which is correctly rendered in the translation here. However, the *sūrah* employs a special mode of expression, often used in the Qur'ān which would say, if literally translated, "I do not swear by..." This stylistic feature mentions an oath, then appears to turn away from it. It is as if God is saying: "I do not need to make this oath by..." Yet this does not convey exactly the same meaning. The Arabic original is far more powerful in its deliverance of what is intended. Hence, the emphasis on the oath in the way it is rendered in English. The point is that this great truth does not need an oath to establish it, as it is already clear and well confirmed: "*This is indeed a most honourable Qur'ān, in a well-guarded record that only the purified can touch: a revelation from the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verses 77–80)

The Qur'ān is indeed a most honourable discourse. It is unlike anything the unbelievers allege about it, claiming that it is the work of a monk or a madman or that it is fabricated, or a host of ancient legends, or that it is delivered by devils, or whatever. It is most honourable by its source, by itself and by the message and teachings it imparts.

Further description of the Qur'ān is added in the next two verses, the second of which provides an explanation of the first: "*In a well-guarded record that only the purified can touch.*" (Verses 78–79) The unbelievers alleged that the Qur'ān was given to the Prophet by devils. This verse refutes this. No devil can touch this record, which is well-guarded, kept safe under God's care. It is purified by angels that bring it down to the Prophet. This is the better explanation of the verse that says that only the purified can touch the Qur'ān. The negation here is a statement, not a command. In this life on earth anyone can handle the Qur'ān: someone who is purified or someone who is contaminated, a believer or

an unbeliever. To take the negation as applying to the book containing the Qur'ān would be erroneous. It can only be true when we take it as refuting the unbelievers' allegations. The divine record containing the Qur'ān in heaven is untouchable by anyone other than purified angels. This is further confirmed by the statement that follows, confirming that the Qur'ān is "*a revelation from the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verse 80)

Two *ḥadīth* reports state a different meaning, implying that only a person who has purified himself by ablution can touch the Qur'ān. Ibn Kathīr, however, makes clear that neither of these reports has been authentically transmitted.

At the Moment of Death

The final passage in the *sūrah* speaks of the moment of death, which sends a shudder of fear into everyone. This is the moment when all argument stops, when a person stands at the end of one road and the beginning of another. It is a point of no return:

> *Would you look on this discourse with disdain? Do you make it your livelihood that you persistently deny it? When the soul [of a dying person] comes up to the throat while you are helplessly looking on We are closer to him than you, although you do not see Us. Why, if you think you are not to be judged, can you not restore that [ebbing life], if what you claim is true?* (Verses 81–87)

Are you in doubt about what you are told concerning a second life, denying the truth of the Qur'ān and what it tells you about the Day of Judgement, or the principles of faith it lays down for you? "*Do you make it your livelihood that you persistently deny it?*" (Verse 82) Your denial is all that you earn and save in this life for your second life. How miserable a livelihood! What will you do when your soul is in your throat, standing on a road that leads you to the unknown?

The *sūrah* paints this situation in an inspiring way, drawing all its aspects in quick touches: "*When the soul [of a dying person] comes up to the throat while you are helplessly looking on We are closer to him than you, although you do not see Us.*" (Verses 83–85) We almost hear a rattling

sound in the throat, see the features decline and sense the distress: "*When the soul [of a dying person] comes up to the throat.*" We almost see the despair on the faces of those attending the dying person: "*while you are helplessly looking on.*"

At this point, when the soul is no longer concerned with anything in this world; when it has put the whole earthly world behind it; when it is about to see a world totally unknown and for which it has no provisions other than its deeds in this life; when it sees a new world and cannot say anything about it; when it has separated from all around it who only see a dying body but who stand helpless, then human power and knowledge are at their end. At this point, people realize that they are absolutely helpless: they see nothing, know nothing and can do nothing. All power and knowledge belong to God alone, with no one able to cast any doubt about this truth: "*We are closer to him than you, although you do not see Us.*" (Verse 85)

At this point God's majesty is clearly felt, and people experience a sense of awe resulting from His presence. He is no doubt present at all times, but the Qur'ānic statement reawakens the feeling of this truth which people often overlook. Hence, the scene of death is overshadowed by feelings of God's majesty and awe, in addition to people's own helplessness.

The *sūrah* now puts forward a challenge that ends all argument: "*Why, if you think you are not to be judged, can you not restore that [ebbing life], if what you claim is true?*" (Verses 86–87) If it is true that there will be no reckoning of deeds and no requital for them and you are free, with no accounting to make, then try, if you can, to restore this soul that has come up to the throat and put it back in place. Try, if you can, to prevent its march towards that reckoning while you helplessly look on.

Thus all excuses, arguments and disputes end. This truth is felt to be so weighty that no man can stand up to it, except through stubborn and baseless denial.

The Final Destination

The *sūrah* now explains the fate of the soul that has turned its back on this world to begin its new and permanent life:

If that dying person is one of those who are drawn close to God, he will have repose, fulfilment and a garden of bliss. If he is one of those on the right, a greeting of peace will welcome you by the ones on the right. But if he happens to be one of those who denied the truth and went astray, he will be welcomed with scalding water, and the heat of a blazing fire. (Verses 88–94)

In the early part of the *sūrah* we saw images of the blessings granted to those who are close to God. The soul of such a person will now see what awaits it: '*repose, fulfilment and a garden of bliss.*' The very sound of these words overflows with comfort, ease and happiness.

"*If he is one of those on the right.*" This person is now directly addressed with a greeting sent to him by his brethren who are on the right. It is a gentle and delightful greeting, giving him reassurance. He begins to look forward to his forthcoming life with the people on the right.

"*But if he happens to be one of those who denied the truth and went astray, he will be welcomed with scalding water, and the heat of a blazing fire.*" (Verses 92–94) How miserable a welcome! How terrible is the suffering of scalding water and blazing fire! It all appears before such a person and he knows that he will have to experience it.

Now that this climax has been reached, the conclusion is profound and serious in its tone: "*This is surely the indubitable truth. Extol, then, the glory of the name of your Lord, the Supreme.*" (Verses 95–96) The great weight assigned to this absolute truth in God's scales thus combines with the inevitable event mentioned at the beginning of the *sūrah*. The final feeling reflects the effect of this firm belief with glorification of God, the Supreme.